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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted on the relationships between information seeking and individual cognitive structures (both individual cognitive complexity and the constructs used to understand others). Specifically, the study sought to determine how people use questions to reduce the uncertainty of meeting new people in impression-formation interviews. The subjects were 14 male and 14 female communication students who had previously completed the Role Category Questionnaire. These subjects were tape recorded as they conducted an impression-formation interview with one of the experimenters confederates. Following each interview, the subject wrote an impression of the confederate. Sex of subject and sex of confederate were counterbalanced. The results indicated that higher cognitive complexity subjects, especially males, asked more questions during their impression interviews. The females in the study had higher complexity levels than the males, but they did not necessarily seek more information than the high complexity males. The subjects did not necessarily ask the confederates questions that reflected their cognitive dimensions, but seemed to seek the information in ways that followed socially approved norms. (Author/RL)

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A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION IN INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

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A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION IN INITIAL IMPRESSIONS

The process through which individuals come to know one another and form impressions has received wide attention in recent years. Researchers have examined the seeking of information during initial interactions (Berger, 1973; Rubin, 1977), the sequencing of questions, answers, and the offering of information (Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck, & Schulman, 1976; Ayres, 1979), the construction of impressions of others (Asch, 1946; Kelly, 1955; Duck, 1973), the various attribution processes in impression formation (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Clatterbuck, 1979), the patterns and strategies in self-disclosure (Jourard, 1971; Gilbert, 1976, 1977; Pearce & Sharp, 1973), the role of nonverbal behaviors in the social penetration process (Keiser & Altman, 1976), and the effects of norm violation in initial interaction (Berger, Gardner, Parks, Schulman & Miller, 1976). Consequently, various theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the findings of these investigations. The present study examines the relationship between two main perspectives which have been used in the past to understand the complex process of impression formation: uncertainty reduction and constructivism.

Researchers working within the perspective of uncertainty reduction view the communication involved in initial interactions as functionally related to the psychological process of being uncertain about the other person. If little is known about the other, one seeks whatever information necessary to provide a foundation for further interaction; research (Berger, 1973; Calabrese, 1975; Miller & Steinberg, 1975; Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Larimer, 1974) has shown that demographic information is used initially to reduce the uncertainty. If the context

of the situation reduces the uncertainty for the individual, the person seeks information (opinions, attitudes, etc.) which is more personal in nature (Rubin, 1977, 1979); the individual's perception of the context determines the uncertainty level of the situation. Studies in this area have not necessarily considered individual differences, but have provided a general overview of the processes through which individuals construct impressions which then serve as bases for future interactions.

The constructivist perspective has been elaborated elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Delia, 1977; Swanson & Delia, 1976) and is not wholly incompatible with the work in uncertainty reduction. Briefly, the constructivist perspective argues that: (1) individuals take an active role in interpreting and construing their worlds; (2) they actively order experiences by using their own systems of personal categories; (3) these categories, or constructs, are used in the process of forming impressions; and (4) this personal interpretation of others is used as a basis for future actions towards others. Delia (1977) explained that within the constructivist perspective people come to understand others by forming (constructing) impressions or images of the inner qualities, attitudes, etc., of others: these qualities are never perceived directly. Likewise, each individual has his/her own cognitive structure or set of constructs which he/she uses to form impressions and these cognitive structures differ among individuals in the number of constructs used, the way in which the constructs are organized, and the content of the constructs individuals use in creating their worlds. Thus, it can be argued that the constructs individuals use in forming impressions are instrumental in developing more certain impressions and in reducing uncertainty about the other.

Cognitive complexity refers, in part, to the number of different constructs or terms (and their opposites) individuals use to categorize people, events, etc. For example, one individual may see others in terms of six dimensions: intelligent-ignorant, reliable-unreliable, pretty-plain, friendly-hostile, kind-mean, and warm-cold. Another may use only two dimensions: smart-dull, friendly-impartial. Thus, not only the number or quantity of constructs (i.e., relative complexity level) differs between these two individuals, but also the content or type of constructs differs. The rules inherent in the use of the constructs in the system would also differ in that the same construct may, in fact, have widely diverse referents. The above example revealed that the first individual saw the opposite of "friendly" to be "hostile" while the second individual saw the opposite to be "impartial." This difference emphasizes the individuality of the cognitive dimensions people develop for constructing their social worlds.

This notion, that impression formation is an entirely personal process, implies that it is impossible to generalize beyond the individual unit. However, it is not impossible to generalize about the role of communication in the formation of impressions. As Delia (1977) pointed out, the present research emphasis on variable analysis is not consistent with constructivism. He suggests that the key to research in this area is to discover the cognitive dimensions individuals use, their constructs and ranges of application, and then to develop theoretically grounded categories so that commonalities in individuals may be identified. Thus, if the researcher begins with the subjects' cognitive dimensions, the impulse to fit subjects into neat, predetermined categories will be eliminated. As Clark (1979) argued, those measures which allow subjects to reveal their thought processes provide a greater quantity

and quality of information. This results in a more extensive analysis process, but is profitable in a heuristic sense.

The approach used in the present investigation allows the examination of differing hierarchies of constructs created by individuals, yet encourages the search for commonalities among individuals of similar complexity levels. The study is designed to explore the relationships between individual construct systems and information seeking during impression formation. Specifically, this study is an initial attempt to examine possible relationships among the individuals' inherent construct systems, the initial communication individuals use to seek information from others, and the resultant impressions after the need for information has been satisfied. Since constructivism purports that actions towards others are a function of the construct systems individuals have developed, it should follow that individuals will seek information about others, upon first meeting them, which coincides with the constructs they most often use. That is, given the chance, individuals will ask questions of new acquaintances which help them form their unique, personal impressions and reduce whatever uncertainty they have. Thus, it is hypothesized:

H_1: Questions asked in impression formation interviews will reflect the constructs individuals use to form their impressions of others.

Kelly (1955) suggested that individuals have a wide range of possible constructs which they use in creating their social worlds. Some of these are less resilient under the impact of new experiences; these constructs tend to constitute the more subordinate aspects of one's construct system. The less permeable, or more resilient, constructs are more durable in

nature and tend to achieve superordinal positions in the individual's grand organizational scheme of constructions. From this it should follow that those constructs possessing the qualities of durability and impermeableness are those constructs held most central to the individual within a certain context; these central constructs then should appear more frequently in the questions asked during the impression formation interview than those constructs which are not as central. It is hypothesized:

H_2: Questions asked in impression formation interviews will reflect the individuals' central constructs.

Some past studies have examined complexity levels, sex differences, and information seeking patterns. Under the assumption that females apparently use more categories to describe others, Nidorf and Crockett (1964) studied sex differences in information seeking. When using the number of pages examined in booklets of information containing personality traits of individuals as the dependent measure, they found that females sought significantly more information than males. Supposedly, this was a result of females having a greater number of cognitive categories which they bring to the situation; however, the study did not actually measure the subjects' number of cognitive categories. This study suggests the following two hypotheses for the present investigation:

H_3: Females will seek more information than males about others when forming impressions.

H_4: Females will have higher complexity levels than males.

Leventhal and Singer (1964) examined reactions to the materials used in impression formation tasks. They collected reactions to judgment tasks

concerning evaluations of the clarity of the impression, adequacy of the information, need for additional information, likelihood of change in the stimulus person's personality, and curiosity about the stimulus person. Results indicated that complex subjects experience more uncertainty regarding their impressions than middle-complex subjects and significantly greater uncertainty than low-complex subjects. This can be interpreted as support for the notion that complex subjects require greater amounts of information before they can form impressions of which they are certain. As a result of these findings, this study also hypothesizes:

H_5: High complexity individuals will seek more information about others when forming impressions than will low complexity individuals.

Finally, since complexity level is thought to be relatively stable in nature, an exploratory correlation analysis of all possible variables in the study was deemed necessary in order to report valuable information for further investigations.

METHODS

Subjects were 28 students enrolled in freshman communication courses at a midwestern university. During regularly scheduled class periods, approximately 100 students completed the 2-role version of the Role Category Questionnaire (Crockett, 1965) in which they were asked to describe in writing two peers, one liked and one disliked. The individual constructs used in their descriptions were then identified. To assure reliability in identifying the constructs, an independent

coder scored a subsample of 20 questionnaires. Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) revealed inter-rater reliability of .98. The sample of 14 males and 14 females was then randomly selected from the initial 100.

One week following the complexity measure, subjects were informed that they had been randomly selected as subjects for a communication study. They were not provided with any basis for connecting the two parts of the study. In fact, a question was asked at the end of the study dealing with the subjects' suspicions about the nature of the experiment. None of the subjects connected the Role Category Questionnaire with the experimental situation; all mentioned that they thought the researcher was studying how impressions were formed but no mention was made of complexity or terms used to describe others.

At the pre-arranged time, each subject was led to an interview room where a student confederate was waiting. The two male and two female confederates used in this study had been instructed to answer directly all questions asked by the subjects (i.e., to give whatever information was requested of them without detailed elaboration). Particular attention in a practice situation was given to assuring that the length of response was properly correlated with the intended length implied by the question. Sex of subject and sex of confederate were counter-balanced.

In the experimental situation, each subject was told that he/she would later be asked to form a general impression of the confederate and that he/she could ask the confederate any and all questions necessary to help form this impression. The impression formation interviews were openly tape-recorded. Following the interview, each subject was asked to write an impression of the confederate.

From the tape recordings, transcripts were made. Counts were then taken of the number of questions asked, and the subject of each question was noted. The impression formed of the confederate was scored in a similar manner to the original 2-Role Category Questionnaire. The constructs were abstracted from the impressions and were listed for each subject. Since the number of distinct constructs was being examined, repeated constructs and obvious negations of constructs (using "un-" or "in-" or "not," etc.) were not counted as separate and distinct constructs.

Thus, the following information for each subject was gathered: [1] sex of subject, [2] number of constructs used on the 2-Role Category Questionnaire, [3] number of questions asked in the interview with the confederate, and [4] number of constructs used in the final impression. For analysis purposes, scores on the original complexity measure were divided at the median (17.5 constructs) to categorize subjects into high complexity (18-40 constructs) and low complexity (13-17 constructs) groups. This provided the fifth measure, [5] cognitive complexity.

Further comparisons of the content of the constructs and questions resulted in four other measures. By comparing the content of the questions asked during the interview with the original 2-Role Category Questionnaire constructs, a sixth measure was devised, [6] questions matching 2-Role constructs. Likewise, the constructs used in the impression written following the interview were compared to the questions asked during the interview producing a seventh measure, [7] impression constructs matching questions asked.

Since one of the hypotheses deals with the relative centrality of constructs, the content of the impression constructs and the content

of the 2-Role constructs were compared for each subject producing an eighth measure, [8] centrality (number of impression constructs matching the 2-Role constructs). Finally, the number of questions asked during the interaction which sought information about the central constructs resulted in a ninth measure, [9] questions asked matching central constructs.

The following example should clarify the creation of the above mentioned variables. (The bracketed numbers refer to the above-labelled data gathered for each subject.) Subject #9, a female [1], used the following constructs on the 2-Role Category Questionnaire:

For the person liked:	For the person disliked:
friendly	intelligent
kind	talented
unselfish	nice
thoughtful	brags
sensitive to others	insecure
has few faults	attractive
unconceited	
feels bad when offending others	
sad	
clothes-concerned	
hard worker	
attractive	

In the above list, the term "attractive" occurred twice and the second mention was not counted since only discrete constructs were being examined in this study. Thus, the individual's complexity score on the 2-Role Category Questionnaire was seventeen [2], placing her in the low complexity group [5].

Subject #9 asked twelve [3] questions of the male confederate in the interview. The actual questions were:

What activities do you have?
Do you like concerts?

Do you like football?
What is your major?
What kind of courses do you have to take?
Were you in another major before?
Why did you change; I mean do you know for sure this is the career you want?
How long is it taking you to graduate?
Where are you from?
Where do you live now?
In your fraternity, is there one special thing that you all have in common?
What kind of guys live in your house?

Following this interaction, the subject wrote an impression of the confederate which contained the following eight [4] constructs:

nice
friendly
interested in sports
not sure about his career
not serious
a people-person
needs others' company
open-minded

An examination of the above indicates that there were no [6] questions directly asking for information about the original 2-Role constructs; however there were two [7] final impression constructs which reflected the questions asked in the interview--"interested in sports" and "not sure about his career." Further analysis showed two [8] impression constructs which matched the original 2-Role constructs, the central constructs of "nice" and "friendly." And by examining the questions asked, we find that none [9] of the questions reflected these central constructs.

Appropriate statistical tests to assess differences or relationships were performed on the data for the 28 subjects in this study.

RESULTS

The first two hypotheses predict relationships between the 2-Role constructs and the questions asked of the confederates during the subjects' interviews. Frequency analysis found that of the twenty-eight subjects, only ten persons used questions during the interview which matched their original constructs. Of those ten subjects, three each used 1, 2, and 3 original constructs in their questions and one subject used 4. This represents a total of 22 original constructs which appeared in questions during the interviews of the 573 2-Role constructs (i.e., 3.8 percent) used by the twenty-eight subjects. Also, only 22 of the total questions asked during the interaction (N = 389) revealed these 2-Role constructs (i.e., 2.5 percent). Thus, little support was received for the first hypothesis since relatively few questions during the interaction contained constructs which reflected the subjects' previous 2-Role constructs.

Counts had been taken of the number of constructs each individual had repeated in the final impression task to determine the number of relatively central constructs used by each subject ($\bar{X}$ = 2.04). A total of twenty-three of the twenty-eight subjects used at least one construct in the final impression that had also been used in the initial 2-Role Category Questionnaire (i.e., central constructs). Of these twenty-three subjects, five persons had 1 central construct, ten had 2, three had 3, three had 4, one had 5, and one had 6 central constructs. It was hypothesized that questions in the interview would closely reflect these central constructs. The number of questions dealing with these central constructs was extremely small. Five subjects asked questions about 1 of their central constructs, and three subjects asked questions

about 3 of their central constructs. It appears that, when given the opportunity, these individuals did not ask others for the information which they most often use in forming their impressions of others. Thus, little or no support was received for the second hypothesis.

However, closer analysis of the final impression constructs and their reflection of the questions asked in the interview revealed that twenty-seven of the twenty-eight subjects used at least one question which later led to an impression construct. Nine subjects used one construct that had been directly requested in the interview, four subjects used 2 constructs, four used 3, four used 4, three subjects used 5, one used 6, one used 7, and one used 14. It appears that the constructs used in the final impressions better reflect the questions asked in the interview than do the original 2-role constructs.

It was further hypothesized that a relationship would exist between complexity level, sex of subject, and number of questions asked during the interaction. The data are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

A 2 x 2 analysis of variance revealed a significant two-way interaction with the complexity variable seemingly accounting for most of the variance ($F = 5.40$, $df = 1/24$, $p < .05$). An examination of the individual means revealed that high complexity males ($\bar{X} = 22.4$) asked significantly more questions ($p < .05$, Tukey) than low complexity males ($\bar{X} = 9.8$), and low complexity females ($\bar{X} = 12.2$). Differences on the mean number of questions asked by high complexity females ($\bar{X} = 14.2$) did not differ significantly from any other group means.

The third hypothesis predicted a relationship between sex of subject and information seeking; the analysis of variance found this relationship to not be statistically significant ($F = 0.10$, $df = 1.24$, n.s.). Total number of questions asked did not differ between females ($\bar{X} = 13.50$) and males ($\bar{X} = 14.29$).

The fourth hypothesis predicts higher complexity levels for females than for males. A t test examining the means of males and females on the 2-Role Category Questionnaire revealed a significant difference ($t = 2.06$, $df = 26$, $p<.05$). Males ($\bar{X} = 17.64$) used fewer constructs than did females ($\bar{X} = 23.29$). Thus, the data support this hypothesis.

The final hypothesis anticipated a relationship between complexity and information seeking. Using complexity as the independent variable, a significant relationship emerged ($t = 2.51$, $df = 26$, $p<.02$). High complexity persons asked more questions ($\bar{X} = 17.14$) than low complexity persons ($\bar{X} = 10.64$). Thus, the hypothesis was supported.

Finally, product-moment correlation was used in an exploratory manner to examine relationships among several variables: (1) number of constructs subjects used on the 2-Role Category Questionnaires (complexity); (2) number of questions subjects asked in the interviews with the confederates (amount of information seeking); (3) number of constructs subjects used in writing their impressions of the confederates following the interview (impression constructs); (4) number of interview questions which match, in content, the 2-Role constructs; (5) number of constructs used in the final impression which match, in content, the questions asked during the interview; (6) number of impression constructs matching, in content, the 2-Role constructs

(central constructs); and (7) number of questions asked during the interview which match, in content, the central constructs. These correlations are reported in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

The data in Table 2 indicate significant correlations between the following variables: (1) the number of 2-Role constructs (i.e., complexity level) and the number of central constructs (.58); (2) the number of 2-Role constructs and the number of constructs used in the final impression (.39); (3) the number of questions asked during the interview and the number of final constructs used (.39); and (4) the number of questions asked during the interaction and the number of impression constructs matching the content of these questions (.38). All possible correlation possibilities for the final four variables (showing higher correlations and significance) indicate more so the processes of constructing these variables than any salient relationships not yet uncovered. The small numbers used in the correlations tend to statistically inflate the correlation coefficients since there is a greater chance that persons with, for example, more central constructs will have more interview questions matching these central constructs than persons with few or no central constructs.

DISCUSSION

Past studies have examined information seeking to discover how individuals go about reducing the uncertainty of the situation of interacting with an unknown other. It has been implied that the

process of forming impressions consists of gathering this information so that future interaction can be more predictable. The present investigation sought a relationship between individuals' own construct systems and their information-seeking practices to discover if a relationship exists between cognitive structure and the process of forming impressions.

In general, the present study found differences between high and low complexity individuals in the amount of information required to form impressions. Specifically, it was discovered that even though males use fewer constructs to describe others (i.e., they have lower complexity levels), those males who are high in complexity do seek more information when forming impressions than low complexity individuals (but not necessarily more than high complexity females). In this instance, higher complexity levels indicated that there were more categories to fill and thus greater amounts of information were sought. However, the complex relationship which was found can only serve as a basis for further research in the area of sex differences and cognitive complexity utilizing greater numbers of subjects.

The most important finding of this investigation concerns the process of gathering information for forming impressions. Analysis of the data has indicated that the subjects indeed did not use all their cognitive categories to structure the questions they asked the object of their impression. However, closer examination reveals that all subjects but one used at least one construct in their final impressions which matched a question which they asked during the interview. This provides a clue to the individuality and effect of the context on the use of constructs. As we have seen, people do seem to have a certain

number of constructs which are somewhat central (impermeable). However, post-hoc analysis reveals that high complexity individuals ($\bar{X}$ = 2.57) and low complexity individuals ($\bar{X}$ = 1.50) do not differ significantly in the number of central constructs they possess (t = 1.93, df = 26, n.s.). What is suggested here is an even more changeable system in operation than previously thought. Although Kelly (1955) has argued that a range of experience exists for these constructs, past research has not provided a clear indication of the variable nature of construct systems. As Delia (1977) has explained:

> Moreover, a perceiver spontaneously uses only a small portion of his available constructs in construing any particular situation or person. Consequently, the nature of a person's impression of another or a social situation will be a function of the complexity, content, and implicit rules of use characterizing his interpersonal construct system. Most importantly, as persons have different ranges of social experiences they can be expected to develop interpersonal construct systems varying widely in the qualitative level of social understanding they afford. (p. 72)

Since the time frame of the present study consisted of the information-seeking interview occurring one week following the collection of the original 2-Role constructs, one cannot expect this time lapse of one week to totally explain the change in individual constructs. Past research (Rubin, 1977, 1979) has indicated the effect of the individual's perception of the context on information seeking, but such discrepant construct systems have not previously been found.

More than likely what seems to be operating is a view of the experimental context of interaction with an unknown other which differs from the original 2-Pole construct collection process where the subjects described liked or disliked peers (who they may have known for some time). Duck (1973) earlier pointed to differences in constructs used to describe friends and new acquaintances and the present results support these findings.

One final issue which merits discussion is, if subjects did not use all their constructs in structuring their impressions and seeking information yet impressions were formed which contained information about the other which was not directly requested, from where did this new information come? The most obvious answer points to the inference process where, for example, an individual asks a question such as, "Do you belong to a fraternity?" in order to make an assessment on the cognitive category "social-loner." The use of the inference process thus allows the individual to seek information from others which both satisfies the cognitive categories and fits within the social norms of "not getting too personal" when first meeting new people. Another answer must be that information is gathered from the nonverbal elements present in the situation which cannot be totally accounted for in an investigation. The mere act of the confederate answering the subjects' questions could fulfill the subjects' "social" construct; however, with another individual the construct may not be fulfilled until the confederate answers the questions without obvious nervousness in body movements and vocal quality. The previous example where subject number nine used "nice" and "friendly" as central constructs seems to be representative of this process. Likewise, judgments of physical

attributes of the other can be made which represent the constructs some individuals use to classify others (e.g., pretty, attractive, stately, etc.).

The present investigation has repeatedly pointed to the individual nature of constructs, the organization of the constructs, and ways in which individuals form impressions of others in relation to the specific context as it is defined and perceived by the individual. Future investigations in impression formation processes must consider and attempt to answer the following questions: (1) What aspects of the context affect changes in the constructs individuals use to anticipate the inner states of others? (2) What proportions of information are directly asked of others, inferred from nonverbal qualities, inferred from statements the other makes, and are left unassessed when individuals are forming impressions? (3) Is it possible to distinguish central from less-durable constructs when examining individual construct systems and what effect, if any, does the hierarchical cognitive system have on information seeking or on the impressions ultimately formed? (4) What effect, if any, do social norms have on the information we seek from others when constructing impressions? (5) Can we categorize perceptions of situations and contexts in a way which will add meaning to the processes in which individuals actively construe their worlds and gather information to satisfy these construals? Until these and many other questions are answered the process of impression formation cannot be fully understood.

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TABLE 1

Analysis of Variance Summary Table:

Number of Questions Asked in the Interview

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Total	1548.68	27			
Sex of Subject	4.32	1	4.32	0.10	ns
Complexity	295.75	1	295.75	6.96	.05
Sex X Complexity	229.50	1	229.50	5.40	.05
Error	1019.11	24	42.46		
Total	1514.68	27	56.10		

TABLE 2

Table of Correlations Among Variables

Number of:						
2-Role Constructs						
Interview Questions	0.26					
Final Impression Constructs	0.39*	0.39*				
Interview Questions Matching 2-Role Constructs	0.14	0.20	0.29			
Final Impression Constructs Matching Interview Questions	0.15	0.38*	0.72***	0.55***		
Central Constructs	0.58***	0.13	0.41*	0.41*	0.45**	
Interview Questions Matching Central Constructs	0.25	0.32	0.37*	0.72***	0.70***	0.51**

* $\alpha = .05$ * $\alpha = .01$ *** $\alpha = .001$